

Salman Rushdie: A Special Cluster

**“Taking on the Tone of a Bombay Talkie”:  
The Function of Bombay Cinema in Salman  
Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children***

Deepa P. Chordiya

In recent years, Bollywood movies, produced in Bombay and hugely popular in India, have enjoyed a surge of popularity worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Praised for their lavish sets and spectacular song and dance sequences, Bombay films, and the conventions of this cinematic genre, are becoming increasingly mainstream. Until recently, however, the conventions of Bombay cinema were largely ridiculed, satirized or dismissed by Indian and Western critics as lacking realism. Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel point out that the Indian term “*filmi*,” which means belonging to or associated with film, “is seen as derogatory, suggesting something cheap and trashy” (30). Salman Rushdie’s observations about Bombay cinema reinforce this view:

[m]ost Hindi movies were then and are now what can only be called trashy...[using] scripts of dreadful corniness, [looking] tawdry and garish, and [relying] on the mass appeal of its star performers and musical numbers to provide a little zing. (*Step Across This Line* 5–6)

While Rushdie’s assessment is a highly dismissive view of Bollywood movies, Bombay cinema nevertheless figures prominently in many of his novels and functions as an important narrative device most notably in *Midnight’s Children*. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the fragmentary structure of Bombay cinema mirrors and elucidates the likewise fragmentary nature of “everyday reality” in *Midnight’s Children*. Moreover, the suggestion that fragmentation central to cinema as well as daily life

points to a greater transcendental truth about the order inherent in the transcendental world but obscured by the chaos, the *maya* (illusion), of everyday reality. However, before we can consider how the conventions of Bombay cinema allow Rushdie to gesture towards metaphysical meanings that transcend the reality of the narrative, it is necessary to look more closely at the characteristics of Bombay cinema itself: its hybridized nature, fragmented narrative structure, integral incorporation of melodrama and fantasy, and its conception of reality.

### **The Making of “Indian Cinema”**

The unique character of Bombay cinema is that it synthesizes a fragmentary and generically-mixed narrative structure—punctuated by songs, dances, fights and other “attractions”—with a well-defined and morally absolutist framework. While this body of cinema initially seems to be escapist entertainment distanced from the social and political realities of the Indian sub-continent, this is not necessarily so. The history of cinema in India, specifically the ways cinematic technologies were received and responded to by Indian filmmakers, illustrates that many of the creative conventions of Bombay cinema are firmly grounded in and reflective of an approach to understanding reality that illuminates transcendental principles through fragmentary voices and narratives.

From its earliest productions, Indian cinema had begun to develop a distinct ethic and style by drawing upon indigenous sources of inspiration and combining these with Western film-making and editing technologies, especially those of Hollywood. The responses of

India’s film industry to Hollywood recall a process long familiar in Indian history. Faced with challenges from alien cultures, Indian society has often responded by indigenizing invasive foreign cultural elements and creating a new synthesis. The result has been a cinema which is a product of hybridization and [which] has the hardiness of a hybrid. (Binford 146)

Indian cinema today is indeed a hybrid entity that has been able to synthesize various influences into an uneasy yet surprisingly stable

entity whose style, conventions and characteristics unify traditional Indian forms of narrative with those of Western film-making technology.

Of particular importance to Bollywood's evolution were the folk and popular theatres that proliferated India during the latter half of the nineteenth century. These local theatres presented an eclectic repertoire of plays that "included song and dance set between long dialogues and...a series of attractions...such as miracles, which interrupted the narrative" (Dwyer and Patel 14). Indeed, the structure of folk and popular drama can be considered the main source of the common cinematic structure in the Bombay film: the narration of a relatively coherent storyline is frequently punctuated by seemingly irrelevant song-and-dance sequences, spectacular fights and tangential digressions, in short the *masala* that attracts audiences and that holds the attention of viewers more than the story itself.<sup>2</sup>

The elasticity of the Bollywood style of narration derives, in part, from oral storytelling traditions "with their digressions, asides, stories within stories, interposed political, social, or philosophical commentary" and in which "conventions of realism are generally absent" (Chakravarty 85). Lalit Mohan Joshi also notes that it is not uncommon for

[a] traditional narrator, unfolding stirring epic battles or exemplary tales of devotees, [to]...stray from his narrative to swipe an irreverent paw at the political establishment or a local bigwig, confident that his audience will follow his departure from the known story. (140)

The narrative structure of foundational and traditionally oral epic texts, such as the *Mahabharata*, are "marked by [a] generic capaciousness and lack of closure, by the interweaving of relatively autonomous fragments within the main narrative structure...and a delight in mixed forms, a kind of restless generic permutation" (Mishra 5). While the overall structure of the Bombay film tends to be well defined and follows a relatively rigid and predictable formula, the multitude of voices and perspectives provided by the digressions and asides resist the totality of a dominant narrative structure.

The all-encompassing nature of Bollywood cinema, which aspires to present a little of everything, combines “the pervasiveness of a capacious or encyclopaedic form...[with] a textual capacity to elicit a wide variety of responses from the audience” (Mishra 13). As a result, the fragmentary structure of the Bombay film has the uncanny ability to “accommodate deep fantasies belonging to an extraordinarily varied group of people, from illiterate workers to sophisticated urbanites” (4). Maithili Rao suggests that, “the Hindi movie is a super-genre that combines within itself all the genres...[and] is testament to the Indian ability to take a commercial art form born in the West and make it wholly Indian—in spirit at least” (146).

The spirit of hybridization that Rao refers to is evident in the ways that Bollywood movies have incorporated diverse genres and influences. Indeed, Hindi cinema encompasses

an inherent hybridity...[which] has over time incorporated the influence of Hollywood, the European film industry, theatre and international art movements, and is currently absorbing and responding to the infinite range of imagery offered through global technologies such as satellite television and the internet. (Dwyer and Patel 10)

This hybrid character, which develops from the attempt to incorporate a seemingly infinite number of disparate influences and unify them into something with the semblance of a whole, is an important characteristic of Bollywood cinema. Rushdie takes up this quality of hybridity in the narrative structure of *Midnight's Children*.

Peter Brooks notes that “the desire to express all seems a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode” (4), and it is indeed melodrama that holds the various fragments of the Bollywood movie together. Melodrama in the form of heightened emotion, stylized dialogue, and moments of dramatic pathos, provides filmmakers with alternative narrative strategies by which to represent reality. According to the Hindu worldview, around whose transcendental principles Bombay films are usually structured, “material reality is an aspect of spiritual or transcendent Reality, and so, what we see is ‘the reflection of reality in the mirror

of illusion” (Chakravarty 82).<sup>3</sup> By acting as a parody of a “realist” depiction of the same emotion the hyperbolic nature of melodrama emphasizes the staged quality of the film and highlights the fact that filmic “reality” is in fact an illusion. Dwyer and Patel argue that melodrama needs to be read metaphorically in order to understand

its typical focus on the family, the suffering of the powerless good (especially through illness, family break-up, misunderstanding and doomed love), often at the hands of a villain who is known to the family. There are situations that can be resolved only through convenient deaths, chance meetings, and implausible happy endings...*In these pleasures the audience can overcome the meaninglessness of everyday existence and find reassurance for their fractured lives.* (29 italics added)<sup>4</sup>

Further, Vijay Mishra points out that “[m]elodrama of the Bombay Cinema variety represents cultural truths of a metatextual kind—truths that bind eternal laws together—and not truths of a representational or lifelike kind” (39). Indeed, if interpreted literally, melodrama appears to be an excess of emotion and coincidence that strains our ability to believe the narrative. However, at a metaphoric level melodrama actually functions as an important narrative device gesturing towards the metaphysical views of realism and reality that anchor the film.

Another important element of Bombay film associated with its melodramatic style is the use of fantasy or fantastic elements such as miracles, coincidences, magic, and gods interacting in the human world. These elements fulfil similar representational purposes as melodrama in that they help writers and filmmakers alike depict a reality that cannot be fully expressed through realist conventions. Shaul Bassi observes that

[s]tories in India tell the truth without imitating the world. Realism is not their degree zero of representation. This is not because in India carpets actually fly, but because, in order to describe and comment on reality, carpets may be made to fly. People experience and construct their world through imaginary elements, too: this is *their* realism. (49)

Although Bassi writes specifically about *Midnight's Children* here, his observations hold for Bombay cinema in general, because, like melodrama, these fantastic elements are employed in order to convey greater metaphysical truths.

### Reality: Bollywood Style

The cinema is widely considered to be a microcosm of the social, political, economic, and cultural life of a nation, “a contested site where meanings are negotiated, traditions made and remade, identities affirmed or rejected” (Chakravarty 32). If we consider this statement in relation to the ways Bollywood cinema conceives of and portrays reality, we can understand more fully how the fragmentary and heterogeneous form of the Bombay film gestures towards a higher order.

Bollywood movies consist of various fragments, which are then assembled into a heterogeneous, if somewhat chaotic, whole. Mishra notes that often, “the script is a loose idea that grows as the film is manufactured in parts” (14). This heterogeneous approach to film-making succeeds in the Indian context because Bollywood movies are usually organized around widely recognized principles of morality (both religious and social, and usually Hindu) which transcend any particular movie. The various fragments of a Bollywood film are thus involved in *transmitting*, rather than *creating*, a particular (meta)reality. The moral principles that make up the “core” of the movie may be threatened over the course of the narration, but they are nearly always re-established by the end of the movie when all challenges to the dominant order are generally resolved.<sup>5</sup>

However, even though transcendental, and ultimately immutable, principles frame the narrative of the Bombay film, its structure does not preclude alternative voices or perspectives. Mishra suggests that the form of Bombay Cinema

has developed ways of bypassing its own inherently imperialistic discourses...the struggle within the form itself for the release of alternative voices...emancipates the Bombay film from accusations of parasitism, low cultural form, absence of political awareness, and so on, so often directed against it. (xix)

Bollywood movies subvert the possibility of capturing a monolithic and unified “truth” within a movie by replacing the coherent and unified narrative structure with a fragmentary narrative. Although “[i]t is true that the form’s dominant Hindu nationalist ideology would remain intact in this genre, the great strength of Bombay Cinema...will always lie in its capacity to carry deconstructive or transgressive moments in its interstices” (Mishra 33). Indeed, the fundamental hybridity of the narrative structure of Bombay cinema imbues it with the ability to resist hegemonic truths and absolutist narrative techniques. Its heterogeneity incorporates fragments that are reflective of various genres, styles and influences into an overall structure, which in turn imparts the illusion of coherence to an entity that is comprised of multiple voices and perspectives. These characteristics make Bombay Cinema a useful literary metaphor for an author like Rushdie who is preoccupied with depicting the hybridized and fragmentary nature of India and of its citizens.

**“I’m watching...an Indian movie”: *Midnight’s Children* and Bombay cinema**

In *Midnight’s Children*, “Rushdie has uniquely voiced the post-colonial milieu of India...by reflecting this hybrid, metamorphic, heteroglossic identity and voice through the language, structure, and conventions of film” (Quazi 1). I argue that it is specifically Bombay cinema that imparts its ways of perceiving and depicting reality to the narrative structure of *Midnight’s Children*. Although this section focuses primarily on the influence of Bombay cinema on the development of Rushdie’s fragmentary narrative structure, there are also a number of literary precedents whose unconventional literary styles (i.e. Laurence Sterne, James Joyce, G. V. Desani) have influenced Rushdie’s. In addition, Rushdie credits the movie “The Wizard of Oz” as having profoundly influenced him as a writer. While many of these connections have been discussed in the extant body of critical literature, as well as by Rushdie himself, the relationship between Rushdie and Bollywood cinema remains largely unexplored. By considering the ways in which Bombay cinema exerts its own *unique* influence on Rushdie, this article seeks to further nuance the critical debate.

Throughout the novel, the narrator Saleem Sinai is self-consciously engaged in the task of giving meaning to his existence by weaving the fragments of his life together into a coherent narrative. Saleem is a hybrid individual, physically, intellectually and psychologically, and the complexity of his character, which mirrors that of the nation, is what his narrative aspires to capture at a personal as well as political level. In many ways, Saleem can be considered to be a personification of Bombay Cinema. Mishra has suggested that “Bombay Cinema is an allegory of the nation in the making” (32), while Prasad notes the relationship between political realities in India and the structure of the Bollywood film (137; 118). I would add a metaphorical dimension to this relationship: the evolution of the narrative structure of the film parallels the process through which, in the years leading up to and following Independence, India was struggling to develop a national identity and its fragmented narrative reflects the fragmented psyche of the post-colonial Indian subject. Thus, Bombay cinema can be considered to reflect India literally, metaphorically and allegorically. Saleem makes the same claims for himself in *Midnight’s Children*: “actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world” (273). Thus, we can diagram the relationship between India, Saleem and Bombay Cinema as an equilateral triangle with one element at each apex. If Bombay Cinema reflects India and India reflects Saleem (and vice versa), then Bombay Cinema and Saleem should also reflect one another. Indeed, Saleem’s attitudes towards the nature of reality correlate with Bollywood’s take on filmic realism. Further, the structure of Saleem’s narrative reflects the heterogeneous synthesis of fragments and the mixing of genres that are characteristic of the Bombay film. Finally, Saleem’s integral incorporation of melodramatic and fantastic elements into his narrative parallels the function of such elements in Bombay Cinema.

The conception and construction of reality in *Midnight’s Children* is one of the central concerns of the novel. Although Saleem provides the readers with the perspective through which we see India and its history, he proves himself to be an unreliable narrator whose narrative, ostensibly



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constructed from his own memories, is full of errors. However, Saleem's narrative goes beyond mere memory to include characters, situations, stories and other elements from his past about which he could have no knowledge. Saleem himself states that "[he] seems to have found from somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps in [his] knowledge" (14). This statement should alert the reader to the fact that what is presented by the narrator as objective truth is actually constructed of stories, fragments, and scraps which are woven together into a "coherent" past. He justifies this by relying on the legitimacy of

memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind [which] selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies, also; but in the end, it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone's else's version more than his own. (242)

Although Saleem realizes that he has made mistakes, such as when he states that "in [his] India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time" (190), or the claim that "the election of 1957 took place before, and not after [his] tenth birthday" (254), he nevertheless remains committed to the truth of his version of Indian history.

Rushdie himself draws attention to the fact that the novel is full of inaccuracies that undermine the reliability of Saleem's narrative:

According to Saleem, Ganesha sat at the feet of the poet Valmiki and took down the *Ramayana*. Saleem is wrong. It is not his only mistake...the calendar of festivals includes a perfectly good Mumbadevi Day...And how could Lata Mangeshkar have been heard on All-India Radio as early as 1946? And does Saleem not know that it was not General Sam Manekshaw who accepted the surrender of the Pakistan Army at the end of the Bangladesh War—the Indian officer who was Tiger Niazi's old chum being, of course, Jagjit Singh Arora...Concrete tetrapods have never been used in Bombay as part of any land reclamation scheme...nor could the train that brings Picture Singh and

Saleem from Delhi to Bombay possibly have passed through Kurla, which is on a different line. (*Imaginary Homelands* 22)

Indeed, although it aspires to complete accuracy, Saleem's narrative does not represent the historical, cultural or geographical context of India without mistakes. We can draw an interesting parallel between this and Rao's observation that "Hindi films are notoriously a-historical—anachronisms abound happily, with no trace of embarrassment" (149). Indeed, the attitude towards historical accuracy evident in both the novel and in the Bombay film industry emphasizes the constructed nature of all narratives, even those that aspire to be "real" or objective, such as traditional historical discourses, and underscores the fact that there is no such thing as a "real" India which can be captured through discourse.

The episodes that occur in the present provide insight into the theoretical assumptions about the nature of reality in the novel. One image which recurs in *Midnight's Children* is Saleem's belief that any given individual is the sum total of everything:

Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come...I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you have to swallow a world. (440–41)

Variations of this compulsive need to be comprehensive appear again in the form of the painter of miniatures whose "paintings had grown larger and larger as he tried to get the whole of life into his art" (49). This is further discernable in the character of Lifafa Das who adds "more and more picture postcards...into his peepshow as he trie[s], desperately, to deliver what he promised, to put everything into a box" (81). Similarly, Saleem's Uncle Hanif, who struggles to write a realistic portrayal of life in a pickle factory, is unable to complete his script because he is burdened by the impossibility of mimetic reality. Saleem attempts to generalize this at-

tempt to capture the whole of life: “is this an Indian disease, this urge to encapsulate the whole of reality? Worse, am I infected, too?” (82).

Guided by the belief that to understand his life it is necessary to understand everything that may ever have had an effect on him, Saleem’s narrative struggles to be comprehensive. He weaves characters and situations into the story and connects them to his own life by developing coincidences and drawing parallels. However, by the end, disillusioned by his inability to capture the whole of reality, Saleem, too, must confront his failure:

Once...I would have wanted to tell his life-story; the hour, and his possession of an umbrella, would have been all the connections I needed to begin the process of weaving him into my life, and I have no doubt that I’d have finished by proving his indispensability to anyone who wishes to understand my life and benighted times; but now I’m disconnected... (527)

In the novel, each attempt to portray “true” reality through art or artifice ends in failure. Saleem eventually comes to accept the view that all representations, even those that aspire to objective coherence, are inherently subjective, partial and fragmented in nature. Since the conventions of traditional realism are unable to reflect the complexity of such a reality, Rushdie must develop alternate ways of telling stories.

**Filling in the Gaps: The Narrative Structure of *Midnight’s Children***

Many of Rushdie’s discursive strategies derive from Bombay cinema, which provides the narrative of *Midnight’s Children* not only with vocabulary and techniques, but also with its very structure. At the most obvious level, Rushdie uses the vocabulary and techniques of cinema to allow Saleem to splice together fragments and achieve cinematographic effects within a prose narrative. The influence of cinema is apparent in Rushdie’s observation that

film has made people more sophisticated about accepting what might once have been thought to be very strange techniques... The whole experience of montage technique, split screens, dis-

solves, and so on has become a film language which translates quite easily into fiction and gives you an extra vocabulary that traditionally has not been part of the vocabulary of literature. (qtd. in Quazi 10)

Indeed, Rushdie employs cinematic techniques from the onset of the novel. For example, as Aadam Aziz is praying for the last time, the lines of his prayer are interspersed with memories of his years in Germany, creating a montage which effectively illustrates the conflict between the two main interpellators of Aziz's subjectivity. Saleem repeatedly interjects directorial comments into the narrative—“we cut to a long-shot” (30); “no close-up is necessary” (33)—because he believes that “nobody from Bombay should be without a basic film vocabulary” (30). The language of Saleem's narrative is highly visual; paragraphs read as filmic images, and words like “watch” and “see” highlight the cinematic quality of Rushdie's narrative. Finally, Saleem relies heavily on flash-forwards and flashbacks to unify the fragments of his narrative.

However, Rushdie's use of Bombay cinema extends far beyond his appropriation of filmic vocabulary and techniques. Bombay cinema bequeaths to *Midnight's Children* the very structure of Saleem's narrative. Both *Midnight's Children* and Bollywood movies employ narrative strategies that are self-consciously fragmentary in order to tell their stories. Metaphors of fragmentation abound in the novel: Saleem is haunted by the “ghostly essence of [a] perforated sheet, which doomed [his] mother to learn to love a man in segments, and which condemned [him] to see [his] own life—its meanings, its structures—in fragments also” (119). Saleem's narrative represents an attempt to bring these fragments together, to impose some kind of order on them, in an effort to create the illusion of wholeness and reality. However, the novel makes it clear that such coherence can never be more than an illusion through the metaphor of a cinema screen:

Reality is a question of perspective... Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up, row by row, until your nose is almost pressed against the screen.

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Gradually the stars' faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportion; the illusion dissolves—or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself *is* reality. (189)

Through his narration, Saleem comes to understand that discourse cannot reproduce the real world in any way that can be considered to be verisimilar because any appearance of coherent reality is actually an illusory amalgamation of fragmentary perceptions.

As we have discussed, the narrative structure of *Midnight's Children*, as Saleem self-consciously admits, is fragmentary in nature. His motley amalgamation of stories and voices comprise the pixels which create the illusion of a coherent narrative. Although Saleem strives to reflect his world through the mirror of realism, Rushdie has elsewhere reflected on the fractured nature of human perception and the inability of individuals to comprehend the totality of reality:

Human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptios.... Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved. (*Imaginary Homelands* 12)

Indeed, Saleem is ultimately unable to realize his goal of assembling his life into a coherent narrative and is instead forced to accept the reality that he, like all individuals must negotiate between multiple languages and cultures, and between the past and the present, and is “obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost” (*Imaginary Homelands* 11).

Through a narrative structure that allows different genres to interact and mutually undermine one another, Rushdie mirrors the fragmented and hybridized existence of characters who exist in the liminal spaces between languages and cultures. For Rushdie, Indian reality is neither coherent nor unified but reflective of a multiplicity of cultures and experiences. At the core of this reality is the same “[e]clecticism, [the] ability to take from the world what seems fitting and to leave the rest”

(*Imaginary Homelands* 67) which has resulted in the hybrid structure of the Bombay film. Indeed, the generically mixed narratives of both can be described as “Epico-Mythico-Tragico-Comico-Super-Sexy-High-Masala-Art” (*The Moor’s Last Sigh* 148–49). The hybrid combination of different genres, religions, languages and perspectives allows both Rushdie, and Bombay film to emphasize that the diversity of the Indian sub-continent is far more rich and complex than that which can be recorded by a monolithic or single-genre narrative.

***Midnight’s Children: Bombay-Talkie Melodramatic***

As in the narrative structure of the Bombay film, melodrama occupies an integral role in *Midnight’s Children* in the form of heightened emotion, coincidences, hyperbole, repetitions, exaggerations, and fantastic elements. On the surface, the melodrama in the novel seems to act as a signifier of vulgarity, stylistic excess and general bad taste: “however overblown, however Bombay-talkie melodramatic” (505); “Bowling my head...I accept that my life has taken on...the tone of a Bombay talkie” (402). However, it is precisely because of the heightened stylization of its over-the-top character that melodrama can also function as a critical strategy which allows Rushdie to mediate between the worldly reality of his novel and a transcendental reality that is always obscured, always just out of reach. Melodrama tends to be the dominant style of Saleem’s storytelling and can be viewed as the adhesive that glues the pieces of his fragmented narrative together.

Through Rushdie’s melodramatic and stylized approach to narration, everyday “reality” in the novel takes on a staged quality that highlights its constructed nature. Saleem’s observation about the distinction between what’s real and what’s true offers us a starting point from which to begin our discussion:

What’s real and what’s true aren’t necessarily the same... *True*, for me, was from my earliest days something hidden inside the stories Mary Pereira told me... *True* was a thing concealed just over the horizon towards which the fisherman’s finger pointed in the picture on my wall. (87)

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The hidden nature of what is true in the world necessitates alternative strategies of representing that truth, and Rushdie's use of melodrama is one of the most important of these. As Brooks suggests, in the melodramatic mode, "gestures within the world constantly refer us to another, hyperbolic set of gestures where life and death is at stake" (8). Indeed, like the fisherman's finger, melodrama in the novel often points to a higher meaning, so that frequently, what initially seems like narrative excess becomes a significant piece of Saleem's fractured narrative. In order to illustrate how melodrama functions in the novel, I wish to consider two main examples: the life, career, and death of Saleem's Uncle Hanif, and Saleem's amnesia.

As in a Bombay movie, melodramatically rendered crises propel the narrative forward. One such moment, the revelation that Saleem was switched at birth, leads to his first exile from home. He comes to live with his Uncle Hanif, a film-maker, and his Aunt, "the divine Pia Aziz... to live with [whom] was to exist in the sticky heart of a Bombay talkie" (276). Hanif's first film, *Lovers in Kashmir*, was a typical Bollywood-style movie that provided him with a "spectacular, though, brief period of triumph" (162). However, "after his fabulist beginnings, [Hanif] had remembered that he was his father's son and dedicated himself against everything which smacked of the unreal" (279). Saleem notes that his uncle was

[f]ond of railing against princes and demons, gods and heroes, against, in fact, the entire iconography of the Bombay film; in the temple of illusions, he had become the high-priest of reality; while I, conscious of my miraculous nature, which involved me beyond all mitigation in the (Hanif-de-spised) myth-life of India, bit my lip and didn't know where to look. (279)

Although Pia, in true melodramatic style, begs him to "put in dances, or exotic locations...make your villains villainous...make heroes like men...put in a little comedy routine...and tragedy and drama also" (277), Hanif rejects such excesses, preferring to "write about ordinary people and social problems" (277). Hanif is attempting to write a

screenplay about the “Ordinary Life of a Pickle Factory”; however, his rejection of the melodramatic combined with his desire to capture the comprehensive reality of a pickle factory and its processes of chutnification prevent him from ever completing his script.

Although Pia states that Hanif died “for his hate of melodrama” (312), Saleem observes that “deprived of a livelihood by spurning the cheap-thrill style of Bombay cinema, [his] uncle strolled off the edge of a roof; melodrama inspired (and perhaps tainted) his final dive to earth” (312). His rejection of melodrama makes it impossible for him to live in the world of Indian film-making; and yet, because melodrama metaphorically enables the representation of a different conception of reality, one which can better express an Indian context than that adhered to by Hanif, he is unable to escape it even in death. In his obsession with portraying what is “real,” Hanif is unable to express the “truth” of the world around him. Saleem, on the other hand, aspires to embody some aspect of the “true” spirit of India in his narrative and he can only do so by accepting conventions of realism that differ from those that inform Hanif’s work. Indeed, while Hanif is unable to complete his script about the pickling process, his nephew does succeed in telling a story about the metaphorical process of chutnifying history and memories, a story that, by embracing the heightened stylization of melodrama, allows the fragments of worldly reality to provide glimpses of transcendental reality.

The other major intrusion of overt melodrama occurs when Saleem is stricken with amnesia, a plot device common to Bollywood movies. When Saleem is hit over the head by a silver spittoon catapulted through the air by the bomb that flattens his aunt’s home (and his family within it), he is stripped of “past present memory time” (393). Six years later, we re-encounter Saleem, now a man-dog tracker for the Pakistani Army nick-named the *Buddha* sitting under a tree:

Unable to remember grief, numb as ice, wiped clean as a slate . . .  
With some embarrassment, I am forced to admit that amnesia  
is the kind of gimmick regularly used by our lurid film-makers.  
Bowling my head slightly, I accept that my life has taken on, yet



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again, the tone of a Bombay talkie; but after all...there is only a finite number of methods of achieving rebirth. So, apologizing for the melodrama, I must doggedly insist that I, he, had begun again.... (403)

While on the surface Saleem's amnesia may seem like a cheap device that allows Rushdie to begin Book Three without the excessive baggage of Saleem's past, the introduction of this melodramatic technique accomplishes a more fundamental purpose.

Saleem notes that "consciousness, the awareness of oneself as a homogeneous entity in time, a blend of past and present, is the glue of personality, holding together our then and now" (404). Throughout his narrative, Saleem has been engaged in an attempt to construct himself and his narrative as coherent, homogeneous entities; having lost his memory, and severed the link between his past and present, however, he loses that entity which imposed an illusory homogeneity on his personality: his consciousness. Saleem loses the critical distance to consider past events and can only live in the present, again recalling his metaphor of the cinema screen. He observes,

the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems—but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible...[moving towards the cinema screen]...the illusion dissolves—or rather it becomes clear that the illusion itself *is* reality. (189)

In his state of amnesia, Saleem experiences his life with his nose pressed up against the screen. He loses the illusion that individuals are homogeneous entities; instead, like the dots of dancing grain that make up the actors on a screen, it now becomes clear to him and to the reader that any illusion of coherence is simply that: an illusion which obscures the inherently heterogeneous and fragmentary nature of such entities. Thus, as these two examples illustrate, melodrama in the novel provides glimpses into the nature of transcendental reality by exposing the illusory nature of everyday life.

**Fantasy in *Midnight's Children***

The final aspect of the relationship between the narrative techniques of Bombay Cinema and *Midnight's Children* that will be considered is the purpose of fantastic elements and how they are treated in the text. Born at the precise moment of Indian Independence, Saleem claims that he has become “mysteriously handcuffed to history” (3). From the moment of his birth, he constructs the history of India as intrinsically connected to and controlled by his own life: “Horn tempered, cucumber-nosed, I lay in my crib and listened, and everything that happened, happened because of me” (151). Throughout the novel, Saleem presents striking and compelling parallels between his own personal history and that of his country to call attention to the subjective nature of historical recording, thus destabilizing and defamiliarizing the concept of objective history. Saleem consistently presents the “real” as more unbelievable than the fantastic:

Midnight has many children; the offspring of Independence were not all human. Violence, corruption, poverty, generals, chaos, greed and pepperpots [violent revolution]...I had to go into exile to learn that the children of midnight were more varied than I—even I—had dreamed. (333)

Saleem's contrasts the fantastic presence of the Midnight's Children with the equally unbelievable, but historically verifiable, side-effects of Independence. Indeed, Saleem's narration is full of “matter of fact descriptions of the outré and bizarre, and their reverse, namely heightened, stylized versions of the everyday” (250). Through such techniques, the reader is left unable to “come to terms with the familiar events described, nor dismiss them as supernatural phenomena... [because in *Midnight's Children*,] fantasy is normative, [while] the intrusion of real history produces a ‘hesitation effect’” (Aikant 219).

Throughout his narrative, even when it becomes unbelievable, Saleem insists upon the literal truth of his revelations. For instance, when he alludes to what he considers to be his inevitable fate, Saleem makes his first appeal to the reader:

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Please believe that I am falling apart. I am not speaking metaphorically...I am literally disintegrating...I ask you only to accept...that I shall eventually crumble into (approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous and necessarily oblivious dust. (36)

Saleem openly acknowledges the danger he faces of being dismissed by the reader as a delusional individual, and thus, he uses such direct appeals to undermine the reader's disbelief. Immediately after the introduction of the *Midnight's children*, Saleem again insists upon the truth of his account:

Don't make the mistake of dismissing what I've unveiled as mere delirium...I am not speaking metaphorically; what I have just written...is nothing less than the literal truth...Midnight's children can be made to represent many things...but what they must not become is the bizarre creation of a rambling, diseased mind. (229–30)

Fantastic elements are an integral part of Saleem's perception of reality. For Saleem, fantasy is entirely compatible with the character of India, "a country which is itself a sort of dream" (132), and where "heat, gnawing at the mind's divisions between fantasy and reality, made anything seem possible" (199). Indeed, in *Midnight's Children*, fantastic elements are incorporated into everyday reality in such a way that fantasy becomes normative.

In a Bombay movie, narrative and generic fragments fit into an overall moral framework; impossible situations are neatly resolved, lovers married, families reunited and fortunes regained through unbelievable coincidences, chance encounters, convenient deaths, et cetera. Similarly, the narrative of *Midnight's Children* is an intricately wrought puzzle; each individual piece is meaningless, but Saleem tries desperately to make everything fit into an overriding scheme which is ordered and coherent. According to Peter Brigg, this imposition of order onto a fragmentary reality can be considered to be an example of "over-ordered fantasy." In such an interpretation,

[t]hings recur, people reappear, patterns are discerned, events from history and private life are offered synchronically.... This is the seamless, air-tight realm of the over-ordered fantasy, made all the more emphatic because it contains such a vast panorama, all of India (and Pakistan)... (180)

This connection between the novel and fantasy is strengthened by Rushdie's own opinion regarding his position as a writer: "I too like all migrants am a fantasist. I build imaginary communities and impose them on the ones that exist" (Brennan 86).

Fantasy in Rushdie's novel fulfils a similar purpose as it does in Bollywood movies: it functions as a narrative component that helps to convey metatextual truths and as a strategy through which an "Indian" identity can be expressed. Saleem is forever pointing out correspondences and similarities. A few pages into the novel, having described how his great-grandmother ran the family gemstone business with enormous strength following his great-grandfather's debilitating stroke, which left him unable to do anything but converse with the birds outside his window, he notes that "already [he] can see the repetitions beginning; because didn't [his] grandmother also find enormous...and the stroke, too, was not the only...and the Brass Monkey had her birds...the curse begins already..." (7). In the final pages of the novel, the recurrences again return to haunt him:

The Widow's Hand had rolling hips and once owned a jewelry boutique. I began among jewels: in Kashmir in 1915, there were rubies and diamonds. My great-grandparents ran a gemstone shop. Form—once again, recurrence and shape!—no escape from it. (506)

Indeed, Saleem generalizes that

[as] a people, we are obsessed with correspondences. Similarities between this and that, between apparently unconnected things, make us clap our hands delightedly when we find them out. It is a sort of national longing for form—or perhaps simply an ex-

pression of our deep belief that forms lie hidden within reality;  
that meaning reveals itself in flashes. (344)

This passage from the novel could very well be a description of the structure of the Bombay film and of the relation between worldly and transcendental meaning therein. There is generally a metaphysical principle at the heart of each film that cannot be known in its entirety, and the various fragments that make up the narrative are involved in transmitting limited aspects of that transcendental reality. Elements of fantasy, therefore, offer a glimpse into the order inherent in the transcendental world but obscured by the chaos, the *maya* (illusion) of everyday reality.

Bassi takes this point further by suggesting that imitation is simply not the basis of traditional storytelling techniques in India. Thus, although fantastic things may not necessarily happen in India, they can happen in stories “in order to describe and comment on reality” (Bassi 49). As a tribute to Rushdie’s love of the cinema, Bassi describes Rushdie’s use of fantastic elements as his “special effects.” He argues that these “special effects may look like a flight from reality, but...[are actually] strategies for the representation of identity that are more appropriate than the traditional ones...in that they are more sensitive to the unique cross-cultural existence of the post-colonial individual” (56).

The reception of *Midnight’s Children* in India provides additional insight into the nature and function of fantasy in the novel:

Rushdie was welcomed “home” like a conquering hero...People assured him (to his delight) that the book was nothing special, they themselves could have written it. Western critics could call it “magic realism” and so on—to Indians it was the simple truth about their lives. (Chaudhuri 3)

Rushdie, himself, has observed that, “his works have often been read as fantastic in the West and as wholly realistic in India and Pakistan” (Bassi 49). These observations strengthen the suggestion that while *Midnight’s Children*, like the typical Bombay film, contains strong elements of fantasy, these elements gesture towards metaphysical and transcendental meanings which are initially obscured, but ultimately il-

luminated, by the illusory nature of what we perceive to be everyday “reality.”

As the above discussion has shown, Bombay cinema reflects the hybrid spirit of India and its people through a fragmentary narrative structure that brings together diverse genres and influences. The hybridized nature of Bombay cinema, signified by its ability to synthesize Indian and Western elements into a fragmented, and yet somehow unified whole, make it capable of expressing metaphorically the character of the nation as well as the psyche of the individual in post-independence India. Mishra has observed that “for all its melodramatic design, for all its detachment from the ‘real,’ Bombay cinema is self-consciously about representing, in the context of a multicultural and multiethnic India, the various disaggregated strands of the nation-state—political, social, cultural” (65). Indeed, the structure of Bombay cinema is able to reflect, and negotiate between and beyond the vast diversity of languages, cultures, and influences that characterize the nation of India.

Even while it glorifies a certain culture, namely North Indian and Hindi-speaking, and espouses an absolute system of values (usually a Hindu world view), the “novel-like flexibility” of the cinema’s form provides space for alternate voices to exist within a dominant ideological framework (Mishra xviii). Indeed, “even as the [dominant] form triumphs and metatextual absolutisms continue to frame its ideology.... it begins to rethink its connections with history (in a peculiarly hybrid, postcolonial fashion), as well as its own coercive or deconstructive capacities” (32). These characteristics make Bombay Cinema a useful metaphor for post-colonial authors like Rushdie who are experimenting with alternative strategies of representation to express fragmented subjectivities and fractured perspectives.

In the end, Saleem’s perception of India is unable to capture the totality of his own reality, and Saleem ends the story disconnected and discouraged by the belief that he has failed in his attempts to “encapsulate the whole of reality” (*Midnight’s Children* 82). However, in spite of, or perhaps because of this failure, Saleem’s narrative is able to provide a way for fragmentary perceptions, melodramatic stylization and fantastic elements to gesture towards the truth of a higher reality. That in the very

fragmentation that structures the narratives of both *Midnight's Children* and Bombay cinema lays a metaphysical wholeness that transcends the break-down of meaning at a literal and mundane level.

Over the course of the narrative, Saleem repeatedly warns the reader about his inevitable fate: "Please believe that...I shall eventually crumble into (approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious, dust" (36). The novel ends with the nihilistic image of Saleem being trampled into countless specks of dust, his very existence obliterated by the unbearable burden of the history he has narrated and a prediction that his progeny will suffer the same unavoidable fate:

Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust, just as, in all good time, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his...until the thousand and first generation, until one thousand and one midnight's have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died. (533)

On the surface, this passage seems to underscore Saleem's apparent failure, his inability to record the totality of his own life. However, the numbers used by Saleem suggest that his failure at one level actually gestures towards another reality that transcends his literal destruction. The number of people that Saleem is trampled by and the specks of dust that he is trampled into are nearly the same: just over six hundred million, which roughly corresponds to the population of India around 1980. In his destruction, Saleem accomplishes metaphorically and metaphysically what his narrative fails to do. In the end his individual existence has merged into the higher consciousness of the people of India. Just as the multiple voices and fragments contained within the Bollywood movie challenge but ultimately preserve and reinforce a film's ideological framework, the fragmentary nature of Saleem's reality and his failures at a literal level gesture to his ultimate success at a metaphysical one: in his destruction, he will finally become one with his beloved country.

### Notes

- 1 “Bollywood” is a combination of Bombay and Hollywood.
- 2 While “masala” is literally the spices that are added to flavour Indian foods, a “masala” movie is one which pleases the audience by offering them a little of everything (i.e. song, dance, fights, romance).
- 3 Although many religions co-exist in the Indian sub-continent, the Hindu religion generally informs the moral structure of the majority of Indian movies. Hinduism is an extremely complex religion, but the basic world view common to most Hindu sects is that there are certain transcendental religious and philosophical principles (i.e. *dharma* or duty, right conduct), *karma* or action and reaction, *atma* or individual souls, and *brahman* the ultimate reality) which are obscured by the *maya* (illusion) of everyday life. However, by experiencing the fractured and mundane nature of everyday life, we can begin to understand the transcendental wholeness of the higher reality. Just as there are many paths an individual can follow to come to a higher understanding of transcendent reality, Bombay cinema employs various strategies (i.e. melodrama, fantasy) to gesture to the higher reality that underlies the seemingly fragmented surface of the narrative.
- 4 I have italicized this sentence because it, in a coincidence that follows the rules of melodrama, finds uncanny resonance in the task that preoccupies Saleem Sinai, the narrator of *Midnight’s Children* thereby giving meaning to his fractured existence.
- 5 The primary moral principle would be that of karma: that good actions will ultimately beget good results while negative actions will ultimately be punished. This accounts for the ubiquitous “happy endings” of Bollywood movies in which all complications are neatly (if sometimes improbably) resolved.

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